

VOID MIND CHAPTER 12:

DOING ALL KINDS OF WORK WITH AN EMPTY-FREE MIND¹

Previously we spoke of emptiness metaphorically as a special kind of power or force that can look in any direction. We spoke of a certain hermit with fiery eyes. Whatever direction he looked, with his fiery eyes popping out, everything would be burnt to a crisp so that direction was completely cleared. I'd like to use this as a metaphor for understanding emptiness.

The language of legend and myth always has hidden meanings. There's a certain trick, or purpose, of important scriptures, such as the Ramayana, which shows that people in those days had a rather exalted imagination in their ability to consider and ponder things quite different from the ordinary. Here for us, it's many times more different from the ordinary. The power of a fire that can incinerate everything in all directions can never compare with the power of emptiness. What this means is that it's empty in a much greater or profound way. Because fire is an ordinary material thing that burns up only material stuff, creating merely material vacancy. It can't burn anything mental or spiritual.

Here we're speaking of matters relating to consciousness, so something able to incinerate or destroy everything must include mental matters. This power is the emptiness that is void of all feelings and thoughts of "me" and "mine," of ego, which are mental phenomenon. That hermit's special power can be used to harm others through selfishness. To harm others for one's own benefit is fundamentally selfish. In our case, as we aspire to unselfishness, to destroying all selfishness, we don't seek any particular benefits from anyone. This distinction is of tremendous importance.

Don't Assume Clinging is Always Present

Ordinarily, people want our personal benefits, generally considering only ourselves, which makes it impossible for us to understand emptiness. It has no place to penetrate our understanding. If we study emptiness for selfish purposes, for building up our egos, for the sake of "me" and "mine," there will never be a day that they really understand it. Unable to understand it, there's no way that they can practice it, until they finally get that it's essentially about unselfishness, for the sake of not having any self in the first place.

If we merely seek our own personal benefit, there will be little understanding when studying or hearing about emptiness. It will only sound contradictory and confusing. For example, when people raise the objection: "If there's no selfishness, then what will do any work? What will push people and motivate them to work?" Ordinarily, people's observations go no further than this. When we run into such obstacles, even such superficial ones, we lose interest. We give up trying to understand emptiness and toss it away, throwing out the baby with the bath water. So it is that they don't have much chance of understanding emptiness.

This is the kind of thing that I've been observing for many years, concerning the propagation of emptiness in society. In fact, the explanations are sufficient for understanding, but they're not able to read much about it. Their minds reject it and won't take it in, even from the first moment they hear about emptiness. They write it off as something worthless, or dangerous. Because the credit of the speaker isn't enough to ensure that they'll consider properly. So there aren't many people who understand. Though there are some, it's a small amount. Furthermore, they don't have the least

¹ Throughout this and his many other teachings concerning *suññatā* (emptiness, voidness), Tan Ajahn uses the Thai word *waang* to translate *suñña* and *suññatā*. *Waang* can mean 'free' as in 'free time'; 'empty' as in an 'empty glass' or an 'empty room'; and 'void' as in 'null and void.' This translation will alternate among the various renditions.

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glimmer of understanding that we can have aspirations, hopes, and needs, with wisdom and without having to cling to them.

But they object, "without clinging, there are no hopes and needs." That might seem theoretically correct, but it's a misunderstanding. This is because the meanings of words like 'desire,' 'hope,' and 'wishes,' are ambiguous, as is so often the case with language, such as when I've previously said that one can do anything, whether with clinging or without clinging. They go and understand that when we still have defilements remaining, then it's impossible to do anything without clinging, and so they brush off this matter and don't tolerate reading any explanations. They assume we are always thick with defilement, that clinging is continuously occurring. Should anyone say "do your work without clinging," they can't take it. They consider it crazy or ridiculous.

If one is going to understand this matter, we must review back to the point that this heart or mind is regularly empty of clinging. Such emptiness is the mind's foundation. Clinging only arises occasionally and temporarily.

When we're doing anything important, we're careful to prevent clinging from arising. As soon as we're absentminded, it's born again. If we're careless, clinging arises. But here, in a place dedicated to study-practice, we can't be absentminded because there's enough time to consider and reflect, and therefore there is no excuse for being careless. Whenever we think of doing something, it's not just some emotional reaction. There's time to think, consider, and prepare oneself. Therefore, please follow the principle that this heart is fundamentally free from clinging. It's more skilful to employ this awareness of "free mind," even for those who still believe that they have defilements and that they are clinging to something or another all the time.

Work Must Be Practice

Work is an important problem for most of us, because we work to live. We can say our life has value because of work. This makes it a most important issue. Consequently, I like to raise work as a crucial issue.

An important problem for people is the issue of work, because we work to live. We can say our life has value because of work. This makes it a most important issue for us. Consequently, I like to focus on work as a crucial issue. On the back covers of our "Looking Within" series, I asked the publishers to print a little verse that concerns our topic.

**Do work of all kinds with a free heart,
Offer the fruits of work to voidness,
Eat the food of emptiness as the noble ones do,
Die to one's self from the very beginning.**

Some of the phrases in this little verse are rather simple and conventional, but I think you'll forgive me for that because it's meant to be intelligible to ordinary people.

Why is it that we intended to use such strong language, that makes it hard to ignore or forget, such as "as the noble ones do" and "die to one's self from the very beginning"? In the original Thai, the very start, are the ordinary language of villagers which Bangkok people probably don't understand. It was my intention to use this phrasing in order to insist that these are the words of the sticks, of the boondocks. They're spoken from the village. At a minimum, we're teaching a few new words for those who might be interested (and here I was using Southern dialect).

What do you think of these words? It's obvious that the meaning is for those of us who haven't ended all defilement. It's necessary to request or to impel them to work with empty heart. For those who are empty of defilement already, there's no need to request or implore them. They naturally work with an

empty heart. So we're speaking to those who still experience defilement, advising them, or even forcing them, to do all kinds of work with an empty heart. Otherwise things will be atrocious.

The tricky part of this verse is the phrase 'free-empty heart.'² This is something we've spoken of many times, and in great detail, so you can read about it on your own.³ What's most important, what you must understand completely, is that these words have their own special meaning. They are not the ordinary language of people who've never studied or reflected deeply on these matters. Consider it "Dhamma language" that requires special explanation.

The phrase 'empty heart' (or 'free mind') does not mean, in the way that many would assume, the kind of heart or mind that doesn't think at all, like the kind of person who lacks intelligence. If mind is empty in the sense of not thinking at all, it's not really any different than sleeping. In that case, one couldn't do anything useful. Further, there's the point of "faking" emptiness. If one fakes it, or just puts on a show, then it's what we call "delinquent" or "criminal emptiness." If one just fakes emptiness without understanding it and merely seeks some personal benefit, such as avoiding responsibility, we call it "criminal empty mind."

Here, there's a specifically Buddhist meaning that specifies heart-mind empty of all kinds of thoughts and feelings connected with any meaning of 'me' or 'mine.' Those thoughts and feelings which are concerned and connected with 'me' and 'mine' are extensive. These need to be observed, studied, and understood. If we don't know such things, we'll never understand emptiness. We ought to be industrious in trying to discriminate among the many thoughts and feelings that happen every day: which of them are empty — that is, empty of any sense of 'me' and 'mine' — and which are not empty. The easier, most practical way to put it is that any thinking and feeling that is mixed up with greed, hatred, and delusion, are neither free nor empty. If there's no admixture of greed, hatred, and delusion, then the heart is empty and free. Thinking that is empty has no selfish feeling, and is not about or for one's self. There is just pure, untainted awareness and intelligence, whether with or without thought.

Two Kinds of Intelligence

It's difficult to teach how to discriminate pure intelligence from intelligence which is enslaved to craving and defilement. Nevertheless, you need to observe this for yourselves and not just believe me. In other words, observe this difference in your own thoughts and feelings. You can also observe this in others who are skilful thinkers, observers, and investigators. As society nowadays blindly worships scientists, experts, and authorities, why don't we consider some scientists and the science they research.

For example, we've all read about Darwin, who studied biology and the evolution of life. He obviously needed to use time to contemplate these matters deeply, just as sages and hermits do. He would observe animals carefully. He would lean on his cane in order to focus deeply, like a statue, until squirrels and birds would land on him. Consider the depths of such thinking, and how profound and penetrating that would be. Is it possible that his contemplation was mixed up with any meaning of 'me' or 'mine'?

If you think about this for yourselves, you'll be able to understand. You'll realize that whenever there's a sense of me and mine mixed in, it's impossible to be aware, to think, to contemplate anything deeply. It's restless, this thinking about me and mine. If it exists, then it fails. It always confuses and messes things up, gets in the way of concentration needed to look deeply into the secrets of nature.

Darwin forgot everything. He forgot himself, his name, where he was. He forgot how he felt, what he would get out of all this, and what his other duties were. He forgot everything and his mind was completely buried in nature. It's as if he disappeared and there was just nature. All meaning of 'self,' of

² Thai *cit* and Pali *citta* can be translated as 'mind,' 'heart.' We use both.

³ For example, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree* (Wisdom Publications 1994).

'me,' of 'mine,' was gone. His mind became completely natural. He was able to contemplate nature most profoundly, according to its actual properties. Thus, he was able to penetrate to nature's secrets and see the aspect of natural truth he discovered. This is one example of working with mind empty of 'me' and 'mine.'

Einstein is another example. For the way he was able to think through things he's widely considered the leading genius of his time. Everyone knows what he discovered, which required a deep, penetrating mind able to investigate nature and be one with it. In such contemplation there's no room for the least sliver of 'I,' of 'me,' of 'self,' of self interest, of benefiting or losing, or any such thing. His famous theories have been so powerful that they led to the most powerful material weapons humanity has ever known. This is the talent of those who think with an empty mind of the sort we're speaking of.

No matter whether one is a thinker, a researcher, an experimental scientist, or whatever, they all must work with an empty mind. If the least hint of ego sneaks in, things fall apart immediately. One loses *jhāna* (absorption, deep concentration); one loses one's train of thought - for example, if one thinks of home or family, of success or failure. Our work falls apart whenever we let such extraneous things enter.

Thoughts of success and failure must never enter one's head. One just penetrates deeper and deeper, to the full extent of the brain's energy, that it can think in a single day. And with dawn, one continues. They never thought of who they were doing this for, who paid them, whose interest it was, or what need was forcing them.

If we act merely as hired labor, or out of obligation to somebody, responsible to somebody, these need to be completely tossed aside while we are working. We need to be able to let our thinking fall into place, to put our whole heart into it so that everything falls into place and we don't have to think it through again.

Imagine if Einstein thought of a theory to help America, which benefited Einstein so much - he had to throw it all aside - America, or the Jews, my own or theirs, what I owe them or not, these all have to be forgotten, leaving only a mind that is empty of us and them, of me and you, of getting and losing, of anything that's me or mine. A mind then transforms into pure nature and can realize the most profound nature. This is an example of working with an empty heart.

Natural Duty for Its Own Sake

Perhaps he thought that he was working to repay his debt to America which had done so much for the Jews. If he only thought of repaying the debt, then he would stop when it was paid. This needs to be done away with. The 'me' and the 'you' need not play a part anymore, leaving only one's natural duty and doing that duty for duty's sake. Thus, one can work with an empty mind — free of 'me' and 'mine,' of profit and loss, of success and failure — a mind most sharp, profound, and penetrating. Such a mind is just like having eyes of fire that instantly incinerate whatever one sets them upon. The empty mind sees through everything, just like the magical hermit we mentioned at the beginning.

Of course people like Einstein didn't work for any personal benefit like that hermit who thought only of itself. Somebody like Einstein was better than that - he worked for the sake of the work, performed his duty for the sake of the duty. At that time there was neither 'me' nor 'us' nor 'ours.' There was nobody. At that time, Einstein wasn't a Jew, he wasn't indebted to the Americans, he was just a pure mind with pure intelligence. Thus he was able to discover something that ordinary people could never find. He could forget unimportant things, unnecessary things, in a way that's hard to believe: whether he had eaten or not, where things were - he didn't need to know any of that. On his work desk there was a bigger mess than any rat's nest or cow's pen because his mind wasn't concerned with how pretty

things looked, or what his work desk was like. His mind focused only on going deeper into what he was researching.

Nowadays, most people work with minds abashed and nervous. In general, whatever people are doing we lack confidence and don't pay all that much attention. We're worrying about whether we'll be successful or not, how much we'll be paid, and who will pay us. Our thoughts are all concerned with 'me' and 'mine,' which creates intense pressure and stress for us all the time. Their work desk is full of matters of me and mine pressuring them. Thus, they have headaches, their managers have headaches and have nervous breakdowns because they can't drop their concerns and worries. Busy mind has trouble thinking things through, is unorganized, and confuses things. This gives us an idea of how important it is to use wisdom in our work. Even when we consider rather crude or coarse work of the sort that most people think doesn't take much intelligence, such as sweeping and cleaning, if one sweeps and cleans at the same time that one is angry, it's like falling into hell while still alive. When we're sweeping the floors of our home, wiping the counters, if we're angry, how can we do a good job? If we're thinking only of pleasing the boss, of getting some reward or prize, this craving or hope.... there's no way that we will escape suffering and that work isn't as good as we might think - not as good as someone who forgets all those things and focuses completely on the duty at hand.

Doing any kind of work with hopes of getting something in return is a matter of 'me' and 'mine' that people are so familiar with they don't even notice. If someone is watching and ready to give a reward, people will work, but when nobody is watching they do something else. Or they work only in front of someone with power or authority or someone they like, but behind their backs they do something different. These people are the kind who bow to your face and trick you behind your back. There's no way we can expect very good results from such behavior. When people work with a restless, scattered mind, concerned with, worried about what they must do to please someone, what that person will do for one, then one can't work with the full strength of one's heart. This also is called not working with a void mind. When we don't work with a void or free mind, we'll never have results as good as when the mind is free, even if it's exactly the same work, exactly the same place.

If we're thinking about pleasing the boss, or a lover, or whoever, the first thought, the first feeling, the first decision is enough. But when we set to the work, we must work with a void heart without any 'me' or 'mine,' without any 'us' or 'them.' There's just mindfulness and wisdom. Then our labor will gather itself appropriately. Our strength is used wisely with a mind that is neither scattered nor sloppy, even in ordinary housework like dusting and mopping. In the end the results come back that the boss or our spouse is 100% pleased. If one worked with a mind all busy and bothered, there would be carelessness in this and that - some spots, some dust, some stains will remain.

Working with a busy mind always leads to carelessness. This is because the mind isn't 100% settled in the work. It's busy with thoughts according to one's desires and hopes. Thus if we seek to work with good results, we must always work with an empty mind - empty of me and mine, gain and loss, and the like. Then there won't be any headaches and the work no longer has the meaning of work; it becomes something pleasurable, like a hobby.

I spoke about this the other day - about working and giving up all meaning of work so that it becomes a game. Then it becomes fun. The trick of working with an empty mind (*cit-waang*) is making our work enjoyable. When working with a busy mind (*cit-wun*), work is suffering. So by now you should understand that there are just these two ways of working: with a void mind and with a busy mind.

If we work with a busy mind full of me and mine, gain and loss, profit and the like which are all connected with me and mine, then the 108 things swarm our heads creating scattered restlessness. When the mind is void, there are no such feelings to disturb one. Wisdom is left alone, like when Darwin contemplated the plants and trees until squirrels would climb on his head. This means all the strength of the mind was used without any disturbance. This gives us an idea of the difference between working with a void mind and working with a busy mind.

A special point is that some people have the character or the blessing to work like this quite easily. You can call it what you like - a blessing, or whatever - but it's easy for them. Some people don't have this kind of character, and some have nervous disorders that make it extremely difficult. Those who are neurotic, unstable, or crazy, just can't do it. One needs the *punna* to have a fit body/mind according to nature's standards, and that they have been trained and developed from childhood, to have a mind that is stable (look up 'B') such that one can train *samadhi* and do it easily.

Working with an empty mind is difficult for people in general whose hearts are no longer fit. This is why there are so few geniuses. It's not that nature stipulates some fixed rule that geniuses are rare. It's mainly humanity's own failure. I don't know who to blame for this, this failing of humanity - of parents, of children, of all of us - is far too much.

Nature creates us well enough for what's needed. It's we who create our own messes. We build characters that are neglectful, sloppy, and selfish, thinking only of me and mine, thinking only of deliciousness and pleasures. In the end our minds lack the strength of *samādhī*. Without the necessary *samādhī*, there's no sharp, penetrating wisdom. Thus, it's so hard to find people like Einstein and Darwin. Such people are rare, and when they do turn up, they mainly explore material things.

It would be wonderful if Einstein, Darwin, and others like them were to consider spiritual matters. In other words, the few geniuses that we have, have focused mainly on material things and haven't given much attention to matters of the mind and spirit. This is the failing, or error, more of humanity than of nature.

Now, we have discussed and agreed to focus our attention upon the subject of quenching suffering. We've been born to end suffering. Consequently, we must turn around all our hopes, desires, and interests towards spiritual matters, in ways that everyone can follow, so that nobody need suffer.

Pure Joyful Work

If you don't want to suffer, then work with an empty mind. Then work will be fun and the results will be excellent.

Details such as how one will work, for whom, what one will gain - all of these should not remain. When it's time to put our hands to work, we must think it through from the beginning and fix our intention with certainty. Just go to work with empty mind and don't wish for anything beyond the power of one's intelligence. Don't take on duties beyond one's own ability. Let one's ability develop first, then expand one's responsibilities appropriately. Nowadays we're careless and boastful, and dare to take on responsibilities beyond our capacity. And so we do superficial work relying more on window dressing than quality, deceitfully hiding behind politeness, with great damage resulting.

We must work with pure intention. The work has to be of value sufficient for our sacrifice. When we know this, then go to work. Even ordinary daily chores, although they're seldom paid, these too need to be done with an empty mind, otherwise one falls into hell, even with the little, everyday tasks. Even miscellaneous things, as well as the most important work of one's life - they all must be done with an empty mind.

So the most important question and challenge is simply to work with an empty mind, and then to expand on that by offering all the results to voidness and eating the food of voidness. These second and third lines of the verse merely explain the first line. If we understand the first line and can practice it, the second and third won't be any problem. And so we focused on the first line: to work with an empty mind. Once we can do that, then we'll understand what it is to offer the fruits of work to emptiness, and to eat the food of emptiness, which we'll discuss in more detail later.

If we observe, like I suggested earlier, to observe the difference between empty mind, and a mind that isn't empty of me and mine - once you've seen this for yourself it's easy. We can say that it's to work

mindfully and wisely, as opposed to working with defilement. If the mind is void and free, it works with wisdom. If mind is busy, it works with craving and defilement.

What we're talking about today has been discussed many times, has been memorized and repeated over and over again. Why is it that so few people benefit from it? Because people don't reach the level of "working mindfully with wisdom," which requires intelligence that is true and pure. But people hardly ever talk about this. There must be truth and purity within oneself, and the wisdom has to be the kind that is empty of me and mine, that is free of egoism. In other words, the intelligence and wisdom we refer to is that which naturally exists in a heart void of 'me' and 'mine.'

When 'me' and 'mine' arise in the mind, wisdom changes into something deceptive, clever, and cunning for the sake of 'me' and 'mine.' This is the kind of intelligence the world seeks and rewards: cunning for the sake of 'me' and 'mine,' which deceives and tricks continually. Our world doesn't respect pure and honest wisdom.

When we speak of wisdom, we need to stress that it is genuine wisdom - wisdom that is also pure. Don't take the wisdom of the market, which people claim to be wisdom, and claim that surviving is the supreme benefit - that's all they understand. That's a whole different kind of wisdom - it's the cleverness of craving, clinging, and selfishness.

Go look at the pillar with Avalikotesvara on the top. There we've written the words '*suddhi*' (purity), '*paññā*' (wisdom), '*mettā*' (loving kindness), and '*khanti*' (patient endurance). Purity comes first, in that there's no deceit. Then the intelligence is honest and pure, the loving kindness is pure, and then our endurance won't be dreary and tiresome. The patience of wisdom does not require that we endure to the point that blood leaks out of our eyes, because purity is in the forefront.

The wisdom that seeks only to survive, is called worldly wisdom, and it serves craving and selfishness. It's more of a cunning than actual wisdom. In Pali, it's called *cheko*, and isn't properly called *paññā* (wisdom). What a shame that in Thai we use the same word — *paññā* — for both. Cunning is *paññā* and pure wisdom is *paññā*. No wonder people are confused!

Let me tell you one story about *cheko*, about "good" worldly intelligence. Somebody once told it to me and I found it so amusing that I've never forgotten it. A while ago, Phraya Rachatha, the lieutenant-governor of the Trang region, couldn't read Thai though he was able to write his name in Chinese and Thai. His intelligence was of the ordinary, worldly kind, which was good enough for the job. In fact, he did a good job — better than lieutenant-governors who could read Thai or were graduates of the Pali schools — and benefited people broadly.

Once, with a visitor present, his secretary brought in a telegram. Usually the secretary would read the telegrams to him, but with a visitor present that would be embarrassing. So he tore the telegram from his secretary's hand and made as if he would read it himself, though he couldn't. But he had it upside down and his foolish secretary pointed that out. So he whacked the stupid secretary over the head with a cigar box, saying "I can read it; even upside down, I can read it." Of course, it's possible to read something upside down. So that's a story of a government official with plenty of worldly wisdom but ended up making a fool of himself being careless and boastful beyond his abilities.

Another story concerns when they were building a road between Phattalung and Trang. The road had to pass through some mountains believed to be sacred and mysterious. The workers didn't dare to go into that forest and were afraid to drink the water there. So the lieutenant-governor urinated into the water saying, "I peed in the water, you can drink it now. There aren't any spirits here now, nothing that will break your necks." So the workers had to work, drink the water, whatever. The road was finished through the wisdom of an illiterate official. This kind of intelligence is frightening, too. It's the wisdom of 'me' and 'mine,' of a worldly sort relying on the better grade of craving and defilement. But it's a worldly thing and can't be used in Dhamma matters. It's cunning, *cheko*.

If I say "the empty mind is full of wisdom," it's a matter of truly knowing what it is to be one with nature. "Knowing" means mind is one with nature and thus knows nature. Our Thai language creates difficulties in amusing ways. So ponder this by yourselves; we'll need another word to refer to this kind of wisdom, not that you can depend on the Pali Commentaries.⁴

In the water pouring blessing that we recite every day, there are the words "*cheko dhammattha kovido*." *Cheko* has been applied incorrectly here. Properly, it refers to someone clever and tricky in the ways of the world; here, it's been applied to refer to a pure kind of wisdom, although it should be only about selfish matters. This is Pali that was composed in the modern era. In the same way that we Thais are used to using the word *paññā* in ordinary, or even degraded, ways such as referring to someone's kid who is a "clever thief."

If the mind is truly void there will be pure wisdom that is cleansed of 'me' and 'mine' and works wonderfully. Work is fun. It isn't even thought of as work anymore. Try this out in your everyday tasks whether they are pleasant or not, or whether they are tiresome chores. If you still think of it as work then the mind isn't empty. Watch this carefully, and try it again with an empty mind, so that you'll be someone who can do all kinds of work with an empty mind. At least be able to do it once in a while. Even if there are times when one's mood is busy, it's up to you. Or if you want to be busy for your own pleasure, you can do that on your own time. But don't do it when you've got real work to do, and it won't be a waste.

To have the fiery eye that sees all things as void, without any craving, clinging, or suffering, requires the knowledge that is wise enough to see even work as empty, so that it's no longer seen as work. Destroy all the meaning of the word 'work,' and it becomes enjoyable play. One will be at ease and comfortable in such work. The boss won't have any headaches, nor will your spouse. Your employees won't be stressed out, nor will the people who serve you in stores and restaurants.

This is the special meaning of the line I composed: One ought to do all kinds of work with an empty mind. Please reflect on this carefully, so that you have the special, secret kind of power like the hermit who can burn up all obstacles and foes with just a wink of the eye.

⁴ He refers to how early Pali distinguished clearly between *paññā* (wisdom) and *cheko* (cunning); this distinction is confused in the Pali commentaries.